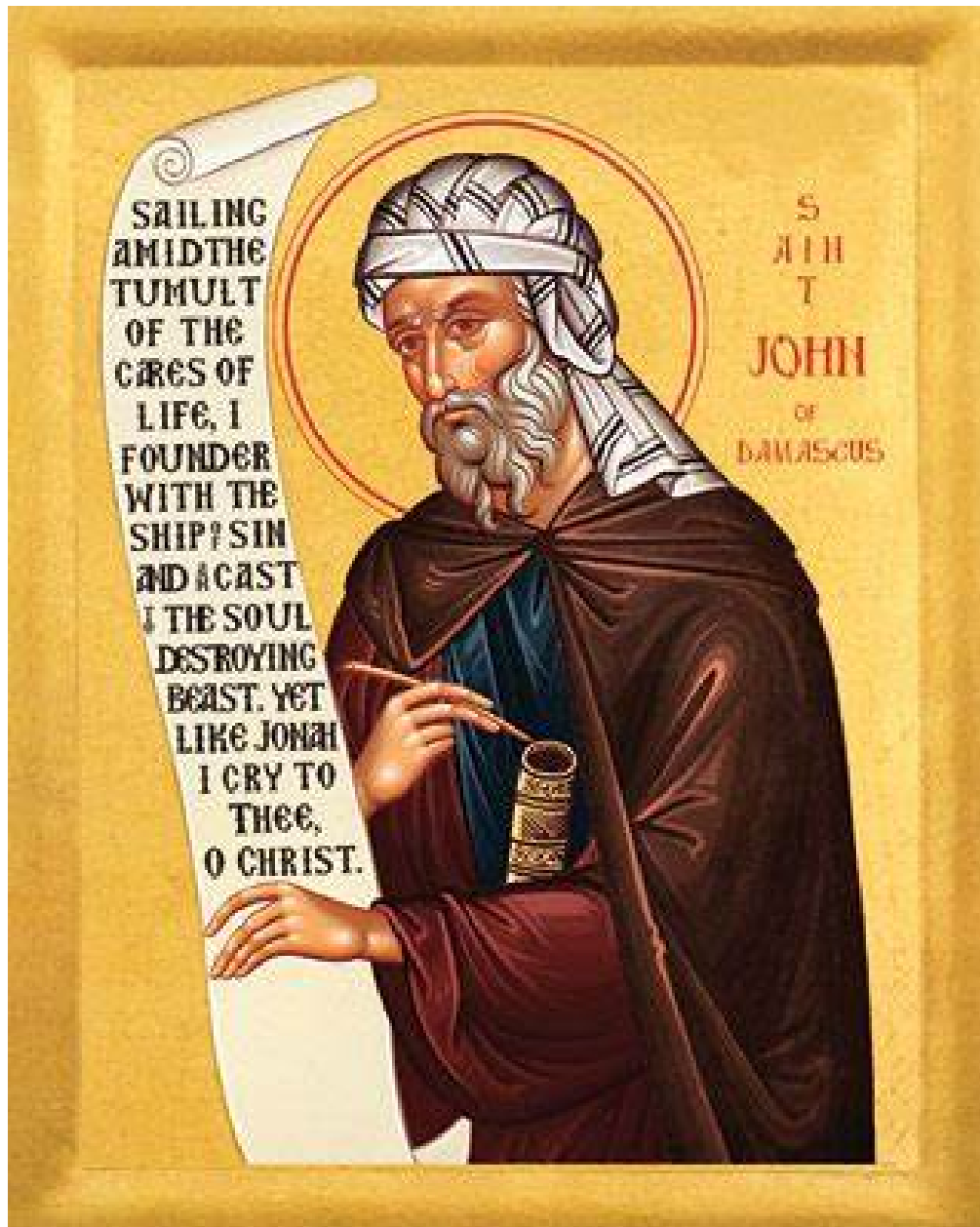


The Heresy of the Ishmaelites

St. John of Damascus



There is also a coercive religion of the Ishmaelites, which prevails at this time and deceives the people, being the forerunner of the Anti-Christ. It originates from Ishmael, who was brought forth from Hagar unto Abraham, and for this very reason, they are called Hagarenes or Ishmaelites. They are also called Saracens from the word “Σάρραξ κενούς” because of what was said by Hagar to the angel, “Sarah has sent me away empty.” So then, these were idolaters and

worshiped the morning star and Aphrodite, whom they also called in their language “Khabar,” which means “great.” Therefore, until the time of Heraclius, they were clearly idolaters, and from that time until now, a false prophet, called Mamed, sprung up among them; who, after conversing with an Arian monk concerning the Old and New Testament, fabricated his own heresy. And after ingratiating himself and gaining favour from the people under a false pretense of piety, he spread rumours that God had sent a book down to him from heaven. Thus, heretical pronouncements inscribed in his book and worthy of laughter were instead handed down to them as something to be revered.

He says there is one God, creator of all things, who has neither been begotten nor has begotten. He also says that Christ was the Word of God and his Spirit, but only a creature and a servant, and that he was born without seed from Mary, the sister of Moses and Aaron. For, he says, the Word of God and the Spirit entered into Mary and she gave birth to Jesus, who was a prophet and servant of God. And he says that the Jews unlawfully wanted to crucify him, but after arresting him they only crucified his shadow; for, he says, the Christ was not crucified nor did he die, for God took him up to himself into heaven because he loved him. And this is what he says, that when Christ ascended into heaven, God questioned him, saying “O Jesus, did you say ‘I am the Son of God and God?’” And Jesus answered, saying, “Be merciful to me, Lord. You know that I did not say (that), nor am I too proud to be your servant. Errant men have written that I have made this declaration, but they are lying about me and they are the ones in error.” And, according to them, God answered him, saying, “I know that you did not say these words.”

There are many other absurd stories worthy of laughter recorded in this writing, which he insolently boasts descended upon him from God. But when we ask, “and who testified that God has given him a scripture? And who among the prophets has announced that such a prophet would rise up?” they are at a loss. We then relate to them how Moses received the law from God who appeared on Mt. Sinai in the sight of all the people in a cloud and fire and darkness and a whirlwind. We also relate to them that all the prophets, beginning with Moses and in succession, foretold the coming of Christ. They also said that Christ is God, and that as the Son of God he will come by taking on flesh, and that he will be crucified, and die, and rise again, and that he will be the judge of the living and the dead. We ask them, then, “how is it that your prophet did not come in this same way, with others witnessing about him? And how is it that God did not give him the scripture, of which you speak, while in your presence, as God gave the law to Moses on the smoking mountain while all the people were looking on, so that you may have assurance?” They reply that God does as he pleases. We tell them that we know this also. But, we ask, “In what manner was the writing revealed to your prophet?” They replied that while he was asleep the writing came down upon him. Then, in jest, we say to them that since he received the writing while sleeping and was not aware of the divine activity taking place, the popular proverb is fulfilled in him: [“you are spinning me dreams”].

Again we ask, “How is it that when he commanded you in your scripture not to do or to receive anything without witnesses, you did not ask him ‘first show us through witness that you are a prophet, and that you have come from God, and which scriptures testify about you.’” Ashamed, they remain silent.

“With good reason we say this, for you are not allowed to marry a woman without witnesses, nor to do business, nor to acquire (property)—you do not even allow one to receive a donkey or any beast unwitnessed. On the one hand, you take wives and possess property and donkeys and everything else through witnesses; yet, on the other hand, you accept your faith and your scriptures unwitnessed. For the one who has handed down this scripture to you has no verification from any source, nor is there any prior witness to him known. Furthermore, he received this while asleep!”

Moreover, they call us “ἑταιριαστάς” (Associators) because, they say, we introduce in addition to God a partner when we declare that Christ is the son of God and God. We say to them in response: “This is what the prophets and the Scriptures have delivered to us. You insist that you also accept the prophets. If, therefore, we are wrong in saying Christ is the son of God, then so too are those who have taught this and handed it down to us.” Some of them say that we have allegorized the prophets and added these things to what they have said, while others say that the Hebrews, out of hatred, have deceived us by writing those things as if they had been written by the prophets, so that we might be misled. Again we say to them, “Since you also say that Christ is Word and Spirit of God, why do you accuse us of being “ἑταιριαστάς” (Associators)?

For the Word and the Spirit are inseparable from the one in whom they exist by nature. Therefore, if the Word of God is in God, then it is evident that he is God as well. If, however, the Word is outside of God, then, according to you, God is without Word and Spirit. Consequently, by avoiding the association of a partner with God, you have mutilated him. It would be far better for you to say that he had a partner, rather than mutilate him and treat him like a stone, a piece of wood or some inanimate object. Thus, since you falsely call us “ἑταιριαστάς” (Associators), we will, in turn, call you “κόπτας” (Mutilators) of God.

They also accuse us of idolatry because they say we worship the cross which they despise. So we say to them, “Why, therefore, do you rub yourselves against the stone attached to your “Χαβαθάν” (Ka’ba), and express your adoration for the stone by kissing it?

Some say that it is because Abraham had sexual relations with Hagar upon it, and others that he tied his camel to it when he was about to sacrifice Isaac. And we reply to them, “The Scripture says that the mountain was wooded and had trees from which Abraham cut wood and laid it upon Isaac for the sacrifice of a whole burnt offering, and he left the donkeys with the servants. Therefore, why talk nonsense, for in that place there is neither wood from a forest or

passageI for donkeys.” They are indeed ashamed; nevertheless, they assert that the stone is of Abraham. Then we respond, “Suppose that it is of Abraham, as you foolishly maintain. Are you not ashamed for kissing this thing just because Abraham had sexual relations with a woman upon it, or that he tied a camel to it? Yet you convict us of venerating the cross of Christ, through which the power of demons and the deception of the devil have been destroyed?” Moreover, this “stone,” about which they speak, is the head of Aphrodite, whom they used to worship, and whom they also called Kabar. Even today, traces of an engraved image are visible to careful observers.

This Mamed, as it has been related, composed many absurd storiesJ and gave a title to each one. For example, there is the writing On Woman, in which he clearly makes legal provision for taking four wives as well as a thousand concubines, if one is able—as many as his hand can possess and support beyond the four wives. He also made it legal for one to divorce whomever he pleases, or, if he wishes, to take up another, for the following reason: Mamed had a companion named Zayd.

This man had a beautiful wife with whom Mamed fell in love. While they were sitting together, Mamed said, “Zayd,K God has commanded me to take away your wife.” Zayd replied, “You are an apostle. Do as God has told you; take my wife.” Or rather, that we may tell it more precisely from the beginning, he said to him, “God has commanded me (to tell you) that you should divorce your wife.” And Zayd divorced her. After several days he said, “God has now commanded that I should also take her.” Then, after having taken her and committed adultery with her, he made up this law: “Let him who desires it, divorce his wife. But if he should desire to return to her after having divorced, let someone else (first) marry her. For it is not lawful to take her unless she has been married by another. Furthermore, even if a brother divorces her, let his brother marry her, if he is willing.” In this same scripture precepts are given such as: “Till the land which God has given you, and beautify it. And do this and in this manner”—not to say all the obscene things, as he did.

Again, there is the writing of the Camel of God. On this subject he says that there was a camel from God, and she drank a whole river and could not pass between two mountains due to inadequate space. There were people in that place, he says, and on one day they would drink the water, while the camel would drink it on the next. Moreover, by drinking the water she nourished them because she provided them with milk instead of water. However, since these men were wicked, he says, they rose up and killed the camel. However, she had an offspring, a small camel, which, he says, when the mother had been destroyed, cried out to God; and he took it to himself. Then we say to them, “Where was that camel from?” And they reply that it was from God. And we say, “Did any other camel couple with this one?” and they say, “No.” Therefore, we say, “How then was it begotten? For we see that your camel was without father, without mother, and without genealogy, and the one who begat suffered evil. Yet there appears neither the

one who coupled (with the mother), nor (where) the small camel was taken up. According to you, your prophet spoke from God. Why, then, did he not learn where the camel grazed and who got milk from milking it? Was she destroyed one day by evil men, as her mother had been? Or did she enter into Paradise as your forerunner so that you might have the river of milk that you so foolishly talk about?

For you say that three rivers flow for you in Paradise: of water, wine and milk. If the camel, your forerunner, is outside of Paradise, it is evident that either she is dried up from hunger and thirst, or others are enjoying her milk. In vain, then, your prophet insolently boasts of having conversed with God, for the mystery of the camel has not been revealed to him. But, on the other hand, if she is in Paradise, she will again drink up the water, and for lack of water you will dry up in the midst of the delights of Paradise. Even if you desire to drink wine from the river flowing by, since there is no water to mix with your wine, for the camel drank it all, you will become inflamed, overcome with drunkenness and fall asleep. And because your head is heavy with a drunken sleep and you are intoxicated by wine, you will miss out on the pleasures of Paradise. How is it, then, that your prophet did not think you might encounter these things in the Paradise of delights? Nor did he show any concern about where the camel now lives. But neither did you ask him (about the camel); instead, this dreamer was informing you about the three rivers. But we clearly profess to you that your wonderful camel has run before you into the souls of donkeys, where you also are destined to spend your life as beasts. But at that place are the outer darkness, eternal punishment, roaring fire, worms that never sleep, and the demons of Hell.

Mamed speaks again in the writing on The Table. He says that Christ requested a table from God and it was given to him. For God, he says, said to him, "I have given to you and to yours an incorruptible table." Furthermore, I think I will pass over the writing on The Cow as well as other sayings worthy only of laughter because of their number.

He legislated that they be circumcised, including their wives. He also gave a command not to keep the Sabbath and not to be baptized, as well as on the one hand, to eat what is forbidden in the law, and on the other hand, to abstain from other things that are permitted. He also absolutely prohibited the drinking of wine.

Source: Daniel J. Janosik, Peter G. Riddell, *John of Damascus, First Apologist to the Muslims The Trinity and Christian Apologetics in the Early Islamic Period*, Pickwick Publications, pp. 260-268.